

# Migration narrative success

A conceptual tool for  
trans-disciplinary integration

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# Contents

Abstract .....	4
1. Introduction .....	5
2. Defining migration narrative success .....	6
2.1. Starting from a definition of migration narratives .....	6
2.2. Some propedeutical remarks .....	6
2.3. Two dimensions of MNS: pervasiveness and transformativity .....	7
2.4. Operationalising MNS: looking for relevant parameters .....	8
3. Explaining migration narrative success .....	10
3.1. The “What”: success factors depending on narratives’ content .....	10
3.2. The “How”: success factors depending on narratives’ framing .....	11
3.3. The “Who”: success factors related to specific features of narrative producers .....	12
3.4. The “Why”: success factors related to narratives’ purpose .....	13
3.5. The “Where”: success factors related to venues .....	14
3.6. The “When”: success factors related to timing .....	15
4. Some concluding remarks: temporal scale and cultural hegemony .....	17
References .....	19

# Abstract

In this concept note, produced in the framework of BRIDGES' "Theoretical and Methodological Laboratory" (Work Package 2), we develop the concept of "migration narrative success" (MNS) in view to create an analytical and practical tool that can facilitate and enhance exchange among different disciplinary perspectives within the project. In the first part, we provide a definition of MNS, distinguishing between two dimensions (pervasiveness and transformativity) and identifying the relevant parameters for their operationalisation. In the second part, we single out potential explanatory factors (of both the pervasiveness and transformativity of a given narrative) to be tested and validated throughout the project. Based on existing literature, we argue that narratives' influential capacity depends on the content (what is said) and the framing of narratives (how it is said) as well as the context in which they develop and circulate (by whom, to whom and what for, where and when). In the final section, by changing the focus from narratives referring to specific migration-related events to broader narratives about (im)migration, we propose the "concept of migration narrative hegemony" (MNH) as a core category for assessing the long-term systemic "success" of narratives about migration as a multi-dimensional and durable (or "structural") social phenomenon.

**Keywords:** migration, narratives, transdisciplinarity

# 1. Introduction

The call that gave origin to the BRIDGES project (*Narratives on migration and its impact: past and present* - MIGRATION-09-2020) stated that “narratives on migration - be it in the media, public or political discourses - affect political processes across Europe, influence our perceptions on migration dynamics and ultimately have an effect on the integration of migrants in our societies.” On this basis, the call pointed out a key challenge, namely “to understand and explain the causes and consequences of such narratives, examining their construction and assessing their effects on attitudes to migration and on society at large.”

In our project proposal, we interpreted this broad cognitive challenge as an invitation to analyse the factors and mechanisms that make specific migration narratives **more dominant and impactful** than others: “BRIDGES’ overall goal is to examine the causes and consequences of narratives on migration. As for the causes, we will focus on narrative production and, in particular, on the processes through which some narratives become dominant over others, thus under what conditions particular narratives become more successful, compelling or enduring than others. As for the consequences, we will analyse narrative impact and, in particular, how narratives shape individual attitudes and policy decisions and outputs.”

In this concept note, produced in the framework of BRIDGES’ “Theoretical and Methodological Laboratory” (Work Package 2), which has as one of its central aims “to develop a theoretical framework that enables researchers to address the academic objectives of the project”, we propose the concept of “**migration narrative success**” (MNS) as a cross-disciplinary concept meant to facilitate dialogue and knowledge integration across work packages. Our objective in developing the concept of MNS is to create an **analytical and practical** tool that can facilitate and enhance exchange not only among researchers (and among empirical research work packages – i.e. WPs from 3 to 8), but also between researchers and practitioners (and between research-oriented WPs and those oriented to co-production and communication – namely WPs 9 and 10).

Although our goals in developing the concept of MNS are also practical (i.e. to facilitate dialogue and cooperation between scholars analysing migration narratives and practitioners who are mainly engaged in producing and using them), **they are by no means normative**. In other words, at this stage, the concept of MNS is not meant to dictate or recommend how migration narratives should be constructed and conveyed in order to be successful. On the contrary, our goal in this concept note is merely explanatory. In this sense, our current endeavour is distinct from that of other projects whose central objective is to develop “toolkits” for producing effective migration narratives of a given sort (usually of a “progressive” or “counter-populist” nature) or to provide criteria for the assessment and improvement of communication campaigns in the field of migration (Dennison 2020)<sup>1</sup>.

What follows is articulated in two parts. Section 1 will be devoted to an attempt at providing a working definition of migration narrative success and identifying relevant parameters for its operationalisation. Section 2 will consist of a review of the main explanations of MNS given in social scientific literature. It should be specified from the outset that some of the explanations reviewed are not specifically referred to migration narrative success as such, but to other similar (and partly overlapping) concepts, such as for instance “persuasiveness”, “effectiveness”, etc.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, we think that those explanations can also be usefully referred to MNS as defined in Section 1 and are therefore worth considering in this context.

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1. The BRIDGES project will develop a toolkit containing key principles on how to build alternative narratives and the exchange of innovation practices across Europe. This will be based on PorCausa.org previous experience and partly on the research done within the project, particularly in WP4.
  2. We prefer to use the concept of migration narrative “success” as an overarching concept, instead than “effectiveness”, “persuasiveness” or other terms that are sometimes referred to different aspects of the impact of a given act of communication. This is because we find the term “success” more encompassing and therefore more appropriate for our cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral purposes. The specific reasons will be explained in more details below.

## 2. Defining migration narrative success

### 2.1. Starting from a definition of migration narratives

Drawing from different disciplinary perspectives, BRIDGES defines **narratives as those attempts by actors to develop plausible accounts and interpretations of a phenomenon, event or series of events, person or a group of persons**. In this sense, a narrative is not only a simple description. By definition, narratives are characterised by a certain degree of stability and consistency over time and/or across space (Jacobs 2015). They include assumptions about causality, good and bad, responsibility and consequences. Though narratives must fit with available facts (thus meet basic conditions of consistency and plausibility) and need to be understandable and compelling, they can be representationally inaccurate (and recognizably so) and include a contradictory set of beliefs (see [BRIDGES Working paper n.2](#)).

In their explaining function, narratives cover both causal assumptions and normative evaluations. Causal assumptions provide the recipes, guidelines, and maps to understand the causes behind the problems at hand. By establishing causal relations between actions and events, they do not only elucidate “what is” but also “what to do”. Normative evaluations provide a moral assessment indicating “what is good or bad about what is” in light of “what one ought to do” (Schmidt 2008: 306-7). It is thus not only about providing causal explanations, but also about resonating with a deeper core of principles of public life, whether long-standing values or emerging ones.

Coming now to narratives on migration in particular, they can be grouped according to two main topics of concern: the process of migration, on the one hand; and immigrants’ integration and the management of cultural diversity in host societies, on the other. Narratives on the causes, dynamics and effects of international migration include, for instance, assumptions about push and pull factors, actors involved in the migratory process and consequences of migration both in sending and receiving countries. Narratives on immigrants’ integration and cultural diversity include rival claims about those who are already among ‘Us’ but are not necessarily considered part of ‘Us’. This may lead to questions such as who is the “deserving”, why some “deserve” more than others and what are the consequences of their inclusion/exclusion within European societies.

### 2.2. Some propedeutical remarks

It is perhaps useful to start by further specifying what our goals in developing the concept of MNS are, and by better defining its scope. In particular, three preliminary remarks are due.

In the first place, MNS is an attribute of narratives about something that we call “migration”. As such, it presupposes some at least basic consensus about *what migration actually is*. However, the formation of such consensus remains outside the scope of this concept note. Therefore, we will *not* deal here with the fundamental question of which forms of international human mobility are framed in a given context as “migration” (and why they are framed as such, and how), and which ones are instead framed differently (for instance, as “intra-European mobility”, cosmopolitanism, youth nomadism etc.). This is of course a very important issue, because framing international mobility as migration (especially in contemporary Europe) is seldom an innocent operation, as it is often associated to securitisation or other forms of negative framing of foreign-born people or even of natives branded as “second-generation immigrants” (for such implications of “doing migration”, see Amelina 2021). However important, this debate lies outside the scope of this concept note.

Second specification: although it is obviously about migration, MNS is not *exclusively* about migration, in the sense that some of the definitory elements and some of the explanatory factors of MNS do also apply to public narratives about *other social phenomena*. Although migration scholars are sometimes guilty of unwarranted exceptionalism as they tend to attribute to migratory phenomena some form of uniqueness, this is actually seldom the case, even in the communication field. Therefore, a lot of what we will argue with specific reference to the success of migration narratives, could probably also apply, for instance, to narratives about global warming, artificial intelligence and many other topics. Nevertheless, it remains an open question for the BRIDGES project whether (and in which sense, to what extent, and why) migration narratives are actually endowed with some form of specificity (also with regard to their success conditions) in comparison with narratives about other social phenomena and global challenges.

Third specification: this paper is about the success of migration narratives, *not about narratives of migratory success*. Although this is perhaps obvious, in order to avoid misunderstandings, it is worth stressing that we are interested here in why some migration narratives are more successful than others, not in how success (in whatever field) is narratively constructed. For an example of the latter, and completely different approach, taken from organisation studies, see Vaara 2002.

### 2.3. Two dimensions of MNS: pervasiveness and transformativity

Migration narrative success is an intrinsically multidimensional concept and it cannot be reduced to one single dimension and just one set of parameters. In particular, we think that, for the purposes of BRIDGES, a useful working definition of MNS needs to be based on a fundamental distinction between two conceptually separate (although mutually influential) dimensions, that we will respectively call *pervasiveness* and *transformativity*. We define the first as the *capacity of a certain migration narrative to colonise the communication sphere where (and for which) it was originated and eventually to spill over to other spheres*. For instance, diffusion could take place between traditional media and social media or between media and politics. On the other hand, we define transformativity as *a given narrative's capacity, independently from its sheer diffusion, to actually shape attitudes or behaviours, at the individual or collective level*.

Pervasiveness and transformativity are obviously interrelated, but conceptually independent from each other. For instance, a certain narrative may gain a great diffusion in the mainstream media system and can even succeed in “going viral” and spread into the social mediasphere<sup>3</sup> but the same narrative may ultimately fail in shaping public attitudes in a deeper and more persistent way. Similarly, it may happen that a new strand of migration narrative rapidly colonises the political discourse and contribute to agenda-setting in a given decision-making sphere, but then it doesn't succeed in driving actual policy or legislative decisions. The opposite is also possible, although perhaps more unusual. Namely, a narrative may fail in gaining any prevalence within the communication sphere it was originally conceived for, but then it may spill over successfully to another environment and become hegemonic with substantial transformative effects there.

It is important to stress that the very fact that our definition of MNS is multidimensional makes room for *asymmetrical configurations of narrative success*. For instance, a given narrative may turn out as highly pervasive (maybe also across different communication spheres) but not deeply transformative, or only very selectively so. This could be the case, for instance, of securitized narratives about irregular migration

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3. From this point of view, we can make a further distinction between intra-media and cross-media pervasiveness. The important issue of cross-mediality (its dynamics and its driving factors) is developed in more depth in the framework of BRIDGES Work Package 3 on “Narrative production in the media arena”.

calling for mass deportations. While they may prove effective in electoral terms (which is indeed one dimension of transformativity), they seldom generate (at least in liberal democracies) sizeable impacts on actual removal policies.

The opposite is also possible, namely when a given narrative remains confined in a narrow circle (e.g. an influential technocratic policy circle) and fails to colonise wider communication environments, but eventually proves able to shape actual policy decisions. Such cases of high transformativity but little pervasiveness are frequently observed, for instance, in everyday policymaking on labour migration in contemporary European polities, where economic narratives about “skills shortages” may not be very widespread among the public, but they do often produce very tangible effects on actual administrative or even legislative decisions. The combination of high and low degrees of MNS along the two fundamental analytical dimensions can be plotted into a simple typology leading to four configuration of MNS, as shown below in Table 1.

**TABLE 1. Typology of MNS by combining two fundamental analytical dimensions**

		TRANSFORMATIVITY	
		<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
PERVASIVENESS	<i>Low</i>	MARGINAL	INFLUENTIAL
	<i>High</i>	VIRAL	HEGEMONIC

To conclude this section about definitions, we should stress that the distinction between pervasiveness and transformativity as distinct dimensions of MNS is deeply embedded in BRIDGES’ overall structure and in its empirical research strategy. Work Package 3 (“Narrative production in the media arena”) is mainly concerned with the explanation of MNS in terms of pervasiveness and of the capacity of migration narratives to gain salience in the media sphere. Work Packages 5 and 6 (respectively focusing on “The impact of narratives on individuals’ attitudes in Europe” and on “The impact of narratives in potential migrants’ decisions in Africa”) are essentially devoted to explain MNS in terms of transformativity and migration narratives’ capacity to shape attitudes and to inform individual decisions. As for WP4 (“Innovative strategies against exclusionary narratives”), WP7 (“Impact of narratives on policymaking at the national level”) and WP8 (“Impact of narratives on policymaking at the EU level”), while they are specifically interested in narratives’ aptitude to trigger social mobilisation or to drive policy decision-making processes, they will also consider specific narratives’ capacity to spread in given social and political environments independently from their impact on collective behaviours. Finally, identifying and analysing different forms of asymmetrical MNS will be of particular interest in the follow-up of the project, and in particular in WPs7-8.

## 2.4. Operationalising MNS: looking for relevant parameters

After having provided an analytical definition, hinged upon the two constitutive dimensions (pervasiveness and transformativity) described in the previous paragraph, the next step towards a proper operationalisation of the concept of MNS is to clearly identify relevant parameters capable to grasp each of these two dimensions in a clear and measurable way (starting from the basic distinction between high and low pervasiveness and transformativity, as adopted in Table 1 above).

For **pervasiveness**, this is relatively simple, as the measure of the pervasiveness of a given narrative is obviously its *degree of diffusion*. Such diffusion can be measured at two distinct levels: in the native communication sphere (i.e. the environment in which and for which a given narrative was originally developed) and possibly beyond, namely in other spheres, where the same particular narrative may also penetrate and be adopted more or less widely.



In media, this distinction based on the scope and degree of diffusion would correspond to what we could call *intra-media* and *cross-media diffusion*, each of which can be assessed and measured separately.<sup>4</sup> Intra-media diffusion comes close to what in media studies is defined as *coverage or media agenda* in traditional media (i.e. number of items, extension, position in the news, etc.) and *engagement* in social media (i.e. number of interactions). Cross-media diffusion takes place when narratives from traditional media succeed to penetrate social media or the other way around. This could be measured by identifying the source of the news and voices in both communication environments.

From a political science perspective, Schmidt (2008: 311) distinguishes between the policy sphere and the political one. In the first, policy actors would engage one another in a “coordinative” discourse about policy construction. In the second, political actors would engage the public in a “communicative” discourse about the necessity and appropriateness of such policies. While in the policy sphere individuals and groups at the center of policy construction would get involved in the creation, elaboration and justification of narratives, in the political sphere political leaders, government spokespeople, party activists and spin doctors (but also members of the opposition parties, the media, pundits, community leaders, social activists, public intellectuals, experts and think tanks) would be central in the presentation, deliberation and legitimation of narratives to the general public.

Using Schmidt’s concept of “coordinative” and “communicative” discourses, pervasiveness in politics could be assessed within the policy and political spheres and across them. Within each sphere, diffusion is related to the capacity to impose one’s narratives to other policy actors (in the policy sphere) or to the general public (in the political sphere). As for diffusion across spheres, the question is how these two spheres interact in the process of narrative production, adaptation and adoption. It is often the case that policy elites generate ideas, which political elites then communicate to the public. But it can also be the other way around, for instance when the politicisation of particular issues constrains the elites’ capacity to respond to particular policy problems. As Schmidt (2008) shows, it is also possible that both spheres remain disconnected, as it is often the case with regard to the European Union.

While measuring diffusion within the political sphere may again be a question of analysing the salience of particular narratives developed by particular political actors, for instance, in Parliament or in traditional and social media, measuring diffusion within and across the policy sphere is much more complicated as narratives may remain contained in closed circles out of public view. Therefore, in this case, a more fine-grained qualitative research (for instance, based on in-depth interviews or participant observation) would be needed.

As for the second dimension of MNS, namely what we have called **transformativity**, we believe that a further distinction needs to be made between two different parameters each referring to a different aspect of a narrative’s impact:

- the capacity of a given narrative to shape individual beliefs and attitudes (what we will call *persuasiveness*);
- the capacity of a given narrative to inform decisions and behaviours (what we will call *conduciveness to action*).

While the measurement of the degree of diffusion is relatively straightforward from a conceptual point of view, the only problems being technical (availability of reliable datasets allowing for adequate search), measuring persuasiveness and conduciveness to action is more complicated, both conceptually and technically. This requires, for instance, the analysis of polls and the use of experimental methods, as in BRIDGES’ WP5.

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4. Although BRIDGES is not specifically aimed at carrying out quantitative mappings of the level of prevalence of different migration narratives, the degree of diffusion of narrative  $x$  in communication environment  $\alpha$  is a clear, relevant and measurable parameter that would enable such operation.

Alternatively, the assessment of the impact of narratives on behaviours (of the different kinds which are considered within BRIDGES: migratory choices, policymaking, social mobilisation etc.) can be based on retrospective interviews or other qualitative tools, such as the ones that will be adopted in WP6-7-8.

**TABLE 2. Defining and operationalising MNS – Summary table**

Dimensions	Parameters	Assessment methods
Pervasiveness	Intra-sphere diffusion (within traditional media, social media, policy and political spheres)	Quantitative assessment relatively easy (except for the policy sphere) + qualitative methods
	Cross-sphere diffusion (across traditional media, social media, policy and political spheres)	Quantitative assessment relatively easy (except for the policy sphere) + qualitative methods
Transformativity	Persuasiveness (shape individual beliefs and attitudes)	Polls + Experimental methods + qualitative assessment
	Conduciveness to action (inform decisions and behaviours)	Polls + Experimental methods + qualitative assessment

To conclude this section, an important caveat is needed. A strong limitation of an analytical approach focusing on narratives' success is of course its **intrinsic selection bias towards successful narratives**. In other words, given the difficulty to delineate those discourses and lines of thinking that do not get onto the agenda, the general tendency is to measure success but not failure. This has enormous implications when trying to explain the mechanisms behind MNS. While being aware of this limitation, we still think it is justified and useful to use MNS as a conceptual tool to foster trans-disciplinary integration of knowledge produced in different WPs.

## 3. Explaining migration narrative success

In this section we will review the main explanations of MNS given in social scientific literature. In doing this, we single out potential explanatory factors (of both the pervasiveness and the transformativity of a given narrative) to be tested and validated on the basis of WPs empirical research. Studies coming from different disciplines (including media studies, political science, sociology, social psychology and history) suggest that narratives' influential capacity depends on the content (what is said) and the framing of narratives (how it is said) as well as the context in which they develop and circulate (by whom, to whom and what for, where and when). In the following paragraphs, we will analyse each of these factors separately identifying the key research questions behind.

### 3.1. The “What”: success factors depending on narratives' content

*What are the features of dominant narratives (in terms of content) that may contribute to explain MNS both in terms of pervasiveness and transformativity?* There is consensus in the literature that successful narratives need to meet certain basic conditions in terms of the content. If we understand that narratives cover both causal assumptions and normative evaluations, successful narratives should be both convincing in cognitive terms and persuasive in normative terms. To be **convincing in cognitive terms** (*cognitive plausibility*), narratives should provide some level of consistency and coherence in line with (often basic) empirical knowledge, whether this takes the form of “evidence” or experimental knowledge. However, it is important to nuance that the question is not so much to “have coherence” but

to “apparent coherence”, since sometimes vagueness or ambiguity may be key for narrative success as different parties to the discussion can interpret the ideas differently (Hajer 1995; Schmidt 2006: 251).

To be **persuasive in normative terms**, narratives have to resonate with individuals’ emotions and feelings (*emotive appeal*). The question here is not so much about the validity of a narrative but rather its value. For example, high arousal emotions such as awe, anger, or anxiety—as opposed to low-arousal, or deactivating, emotions like sadness—induce sharing and thus make narratives more viral in and across social media (Berger and Milkman 2012). Both pervasiveness and persuasiveness depend also on narratives’ capacity to demonstrate their appropriateness in terms of values, intuitions and expectations. Apart from responding to emotions and feelings, there is also the need to fit into widely shared cultural preoccupations (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988), what Schmidt calls “ideational legitimacy” (Schmidt 2008). National traditions, values and political cultures are therefore fundamental. This would explain why the same event or type of event may generate very different narratives in different national contexts. This is where BRIDGES comparative perspective (with the cases of France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain and the UK) becomes central. The same 2015 refugee crisis or similar events such as irregular arrivals, public debates on Us/Them and responses to terrorist attacks (as analysed in WP3) may differ tremendously from one country to another.

### 3.2. The “How”: success factors depending on narratives’ framing

*What are the features of dominant narratives (in terms of framing) that may contribute to explain MNS both in terms of pervasiveness and transformativity?* How narratives are assembled in meaningful patterns, organizing experience and guiding action is also key to explain success or failure. Social movements studies show that frames sufficiently flexible, inclusive, and broad in interpretive scope can become culturally resonant “master frames”, being adopted by other social movements that cluster together aligning to them (Benford and Snow, 2000). In addition, narratives framed in ways that render them viable in the various public arenas make for more successful careers. In the news media, for example, drama, novelty and non-ambiguity are excellent drivers, while in the political arena what matters more is the fit with powerful political and economic interests (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988).

Research from the fields of cognitive and behavioural science, neuroscience and psychology also detail the main factors for communication success. For instance, Hart and Nisbet (2012) find that simply providing more factual information do not reliably change attitudes and sometimes could even have the opposite or a boomerang effect. In this line, there is a growing strand of research that focuses on the persuasive character of storytelling. Green & Brock, for instance, conclude (2000) that the deeper individuals delve into the story, the less time and energy they have to actively oppose the message. But story-telling in itself doesn’t seem enough to overcome resistance. For story-telling to be effective, Flynn (2015) notes that narratives should also make sure to address: the general resistant messages that the intended audiences might already possess; the ability for the audience to believe that they are part of the referenced group; and the repetition of the same story through different communication channels within their identified influence communities.

According to the literature, cognitive plausibility and emotive (and ideational) appeal (the what of a narrative) and adequate communicative framing (the how) are thus key to explain success. In the context of the BRIDGES project, WP3 analyses the features of successful narratives in traditional media and social media. WP4 focuses on the characteristics of narratives by non-hegemonic actors that aim to challenge exclusionary accounts. WP5 and WP6 shift the prevalent focus from the production to the receiving side, and give more specific attention to the dimension of transformativity besides pervasiveness (although the impact of narratives on social mobilisation processes is a key issue for WP4). The question here is what kind of narratives succeed in shaping individuals’ attitudes (WP5) and potential migrants’ decisions (WP6). Finally, WP7 and WP8 delve into political and policy narratives to understand the features that make them successful in their own spheres or across spheres (pervasiveness) and in terms of shaping policy responses (transformativity).

### 3.3. The “Who”: success factors related to specific features of narrative producers

*Who does gain access to the public and political arenas and who does succeed in shaping prevailing narratives?* In order to explain success, the who question is fundamental. First, because the effectiveness of narratives cannot be disentangled from who is speaking. Second, if we understand MNS as the process of putting one’s migration narratives across, this means that the process is above all about groups (or individuals) that interact to impose their own narratives to each other. In short, actors are the subject of the whole process.

**Narrative producers** include the media (and social media) and a wide pool of political actors, from political leaders, government spokespersons, party activists and spin doctors to members of opposition parties, pundits, community leaders, social activists, public intellectuals, experts, think tanks, groups of interest and social movements. As noted by Schmidt (2008: 311), the general public of citizens and voters to whom narratives are supposed to be directed does also contribute to their creation: as members of civil society, social mobilisation and demonstrations, they express themselves in citizen juries, issues forums and deliberative polls; as members of the electorate, their voices are heard in opinion polls, focus groups and ultimately in elections. In this regard, BRIDGES (as stated in the proposal and Working paper n.2) proceeds from an understanding of individuals as *narratively-shaped shapers of narratives*.

When analysing who is behind successful narratives, BRIDGES is particularly interested in three issues: the credibility of actors, the relationship between narrative success and interests and the question of power.

As for the **credibility of actors**, it is important to note that narrative pervasiveness depends not only on the features of the narrative in itself but also on the reliability and coherence of the different sources of knowledge, whether these are drawn from personal experience, practitioners’ knowledge or academic research. This credibility is often accorded to voices inherently perceived as trustworthy on the ground of social or ideological closeness. Recent literature highlights that knowledge produced by science, politicians and traditional media is increasingly questioned. In this context, claim makers with initial outsider status may gain traction. This is partly an effect of dis-intermediation and partly the outcome of the loss of trust in what is perceived as the “establishment”. Despite this well-known crisis of credibility, established narrators, in their role of media sources, still seem to retain a certain degree of authority and influence (Anselmi, Maneri and Quassoli 2020). In this regard, a central question for BRIDGES is under what circumstances (in terms of topics, spheres, timing) some actors are gaining credibility over others.

As for the relationship between **narrative success and interests**, it is important to highlight that matching predetermined interests is a key feature of compelling or enduring narratives. Theories of knowledge utilisation ranging from rational choice to Gramscian and Foucauldian accounts assume that actors choose narratives that best advance their interests. However, as rightly pointed by Boswell, Geddes & Scholten (2010: 5), the relationship between knowledge and interests is mutually constitutive: knowledge and beliefs clearly shape perceptions of interests but these interests in turn influence how knowledge is produced and deployed. BRIDGES aims to shed light on this process of mutual constitution for the various actors engaged in both narrative production and reception.

Regarding the **role of power** in narrative success, Schmidt (2008: 312), following Habermas (1989), notes that a distinction should be made between “arguing”, which means expressing own’s narratives, and “bargaining”, which is a strategic action to persuade others of the necessity and/or appropriateness of a given course of action. From this point of view, the question would be who has the power not only to argue but also to bargain and persuade the others. On the one hand, actors’ power (and privilege, related to social class, race, gender or age) seems to be a key component of the pervasive and transformativity capacity of narratives (using BRIDGES’ terminology), with elites shaping mass public opinion by establishing the terms of the debate and framing the issues for the mass media and, thereby, for the

mass public (Art 2006). On the other hand, persuasiveness can also come from below challenging or limiting the narrative capacity of established actors. An interesting question here would be under what conditions and through which communication strategies actors gain bargaining power.

In terms of the research to be done within BRIDGES WPs, the three concepts are key. The question of the credibility of actors is fundamental to understand who shapes successful narratives in media and social media (WPs3-4), related as well to the process of disintermediation. Actors' credibility is also key to understand the processes of knowledge production in policy decision-making (WP7 and WP8), which includes as well the sometimes tortuous research-policy nexus. It allows as well to consider to whom individuals give credibility in their cognitive and affective processing of migration narratives (WP5) and when making decisions on whether and where to migrate (WP6). The relationship between narratives and interests crosses again all WPs, from the perspective not only of narratives' producers but also of narratives' receivers. Finally, the concept of power is key to further understand the process of narrative production (WP3 and WP4) and the impact of narratives in policymaking (WP7 and WP8).

### 3.4. The “Why”: success factors related to narratives' purpose

*What are narratives meant for?* As said before (Section 2.2), the relationship between narratives and interests is mutually constitutive: compelling or enduring narratives should match predetermined interests and interests in turn influence how narratives are produced and deployed. But the argument could go beyond that: actors' interests and strategies shape not only narratives as such but also the way narrative's success is understood by different actors. Therefore, any analysis of MNS should take into account actors' strategies, including their main purposes and target groups.

Narratives may be deployed with **the final purpose to gain visibility**. This is particularly the case in media and social media where success is defined in terms of intra-media diffusion, thus the level of coverage in traditional media (i.e. number of items, extension, position in the news, etc.) and engagement in social media (i.e. number of interactions). In this case, competition is for space and attention, which is at the heart of the media business and the final purpose for anyone participating in social media. Potential readers or followers rather than the public in general are the main target groups. If the ultimate goal is visibility and market prevalence, the key question for success is how to attract more attention, particularly in the native communication sphere. This may lead to focus on very topical issues, whose attention may decrease in a very short period of time.

Narratives can also be produced **to shape individual attitudes and behaviours**. This is the case of any sensibilization campaign, where actors aim to change people's perspectives and therefore transform the way they act vis-à-vis a particular issue. Electoral campaigns are another example, where the final purpose is to win the elections and thus gain the support of as many voters as possible. Here the target group are potential voters, thus excluding all those who cannot vote (either as minors or foreigners) or who would never vote for a particular political option. As the final purpose is gaining votes, the key question for success is how to convince potential voters. Therefore, public attitudes may become a much more fundamental mobilising factor than previous evidence or understandings. As the historian Yuval Harari pointed out, voters are not asked “for the truth” but for “their wishes”. Successful narratives during electoral campaigns may address these wishes much more than the “truth”.

Narratives' producers can also aim to **shape public debates**. As said before, political and social actors (including as well, public intellectuals, experts and think tanks) engage the general public (often through the media) to present, deliberate and legitimate particular narratives, which include the definition of particular problems (defining as well what migration is) and the identification of specific solutions (starting with the justification of the necessity and appropriateness of particular



policies). Success in this case is defined both in terms of diffusion and transformativity. But narratives in the public sphere do not only aim to shape public debates but also to **position their producers** in a particular situation. Indeed, political representatives, political and social actors and different administrative levels (including cities) may take a stance to position themselves (sometimes also in terms of branding difference) in relation to each other (see Garcés-Mascreñas & Gebhard 2019; Pettrachin 2022). If this is the final purpose, the key question then is not so much how far a narrative goes (in terms of diffusion and transformativity) but rather the extent to which it is recognised as part of a particular actor's identity.

Finally, narratives can also develop to **shape more specific policy debates**. Following Schmidt's words (2008: 311), in this case narratives would be deployed by policy actors to engage one another in a coordinative (rather than communicative) discourse about policy construction. As politicisation may go against the elites' capacity to respond to particular policy problems, the degree of diffusion may be inversely proportional to the level of transformativity. In other words, narrative's success would be measured in terms of a narrative's capacity to reach the necessary consensus (among policymakers) to formulate and reformulate specific policies rather than in shaping general public debates or individual attitudes and behaviours.

The BRIDGES project will examine MNS under the light of these narratives' different purposes and target groups. Success as visibility in the traditional and social media is analysed in WP3, success understood as a way to shape individual attitudes and behaviours in WP5 and WP6, success in terms of shaping debates but also as a form of social positionality and position-ing (in this case, by non-hegemonic actors) in WP4 and success in shaping public and policy debates (and how these two debates interact with each other) in WP7 and WP8. The final question is to understand not only how different actors' strategies (with different purposes and target groups) lead to different dynamics in terms of narrative production and reception but also how they interact and co-exist, sometimes re-inforcing one another and sometimes leading to contradictory developments with uncertain outcomes.

### 3.5. The “Where”: success factors related to venues

*Where do narratives emerge and what path do they take within and across the different spheres?* The chance of a given narrative to affirm itself depends also on the venue in which this narrative circulates and grows. Possible venues include the executive and legislative branches of political systems, the courts, news media (television news, magazines, newspapers, and radio), social media, cultural production (movies, novels, music), political campaigns, social action groups, the research community, civil and social organisations, professional societies and private foundations. These different venues constitute settings where narratives are discussed, selected, defined, framed, dramatized and presented to the public. Interestingly, through a complex set of feedbacks, narratives propagate from one arena to the other.

Narrative success depends on the characteristics of each setting: for instance, dominant narratives may vary considerably from traditional to social media, from the political to the policy spheres. In other words, the factors for narrative success (in terms of **intra-sphere diffusion**) are context specific. For the purpose of our project, we propose to focus on two possible explanatory factors. The first factor is related to the **logics and priorities** (imperatives) of each sphere. As narratives serve different purposes in different spheres (e.g. stories to sell for commercial considerations, stories to get viral, narratives to justify or shape policies, or to gain potential voters, campaigns to convince potential migrants not to migrate to the EU), the conditions for success may vary accordingly. The second factor has to do with **structural and organisational** considerations. In this case, organisation routines, algorithmic affordances or professional values (among other possible variables) may be key to explain different conditions of narrative success.

Another question is how to explain success across different arenas (**cross-sphere diffusion**). Recent academic literature has noted several trends in this regard. First, digital disintermediation through social media have forced traditional media to chase after post and tweets, thus often incorporating externally produced narratives (diffusion from social media to traditional media). Second, narratives emerged in the sphere of politics (and specially in a context of increasing politicisation) may end up constraining policy decision making, thus reshaping narratives in the sphere of policies and influencing policy outputs (diffusion from the political to the policy spheres). Third, political discourses towards the general public (what Schmidt calls “communicative discourse”) may be central in articulating dominant narratives in the traditional media (from the political sphere to media).

In order to explain cross-sphere diffusion, we propose to focus the discussion on two main factors. The first factor would be again the **logics and priorities** of each sphere. Here the question is to what extent particular narratives (in terms of content and form) travel better across different spheres (responding to different logics at the same time) and, at another level, whether imported narratives have the power to transform the intrinsic logics of particular environments (e.g. in media from selling news to convincing voters). The second factor has to do again with **structural features**. Here we could argue that the specific characteristics of media, social media, policy and political spheres may be key to explain different cross-sphere diffusion patterns. For instance, when explaining how the formal institutional context have an impact on where narratives succeed, Schmidt (2008: 312) argues that in “simple” politics the communicative discourse to the general public tends to be much more elaborated than the coordinative discourse among policy actors. This has implications in terms of cross-sphere diffusion between the policy and political spheres and between the political sphere and media.

The BRIDGES project considers all these questions across different WPs (WP3-8). The novelty is that these questions will be considered taking into account different spheres (media, social media, politics and policies), for different issues (related to migration and integration narratives), with different perspectives (including both the production and receiving sides), in different national contexts (the UK, Germany, Hungary, France, Spain and Italy, but also Gambia and Turkey) and with different disciplinary approaches (media studies, political science, sociology and social psychology). The final purpose is to be able to understand how, in which way and under what circumstances settings matter for explaining MNS.

### 3.6. The “When”: success factors related to timing

Finally, narratives’ success depends on the timing of their development, namely on *when narratives originate, spread and affirm themselves*. According to Hilgartner and Bosk (1988), social problems must compete for space in the public arenas on two different levels: there is competition for space between substantively different problems (i.e. what topics get into the agenda) and there is competition over definitions, that is, between alternative ways of framing the problem. Successes and failures in this need for competition bear no strong relationship with the number of people affected, the extent of harm or with any other variable. In the case of migration, for instance, even when numbers of unplanned/irregular/unwanted arrivals go down, they often tend to remain an important issue and even increase their salience in public and political debates. In any case, what seems clear is that the amount of attention received by a given social problem varies dynamically over time: while some problems may rise, decline and re-emerge, very few maintain a high level of attention over many years<sup>5</sup>.

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5. Though persistence of a given narrative over time may be a parameter for measuring narrative success, we have not identified it as central for our research as BRIDGES mainly focuses on narrative-making about specific events over a relatively short lapse of time. Persistence is however a key parameter in any historical analysis of migration narratives, like the one carried out in BRIDGES’ Working Paper 2 (Comte 2021).

BRIDGES, especially in terms of narrative production (WP3, WP4, WP7 and WP8), will pay particular attention to **MNS in times of crisis**. Media scholars note that crises – often perceived as disruptive events essentially conflictual in nature – have the potential to alter journalistic conventions and routines (among others, Figenschou & Beyer 2014; Horsti 2008). Political scientists point the same when they frame crises in terms of “critical moments” or “critical junctures” that open a window of opportunity in which collective memories are made or changed and public debates serve to reframe how countries come to terms with their past or think of their future.

In this reframing of narratives and memories in periods of crisis, time is again important. Kleinnijenhuis, Schulz and Oegema (2015) have shown that media and public attention broaden to a variety of perspectives, causes and solutions during a crisis. Similarly, Snow, Vliegthart and Corrigan-Brown (2007) argued that frame repertoires proliferated as an event reached its highest intensity, thus with the increase of media and public attention. As an issue lost its novelty, a consensus on its interpretation and understanding is more easily reached. In other words, salience of an issue allows for the use of more and wider frames (that may be changing with long lasting crisis) while the end of a crisis (and the decrease of media attention) may lead to new consensuses in what Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017: 1753) call “frame crystallisation”. As BRIDGES research focuses on specific events at particular moments in time, we lack the diachronic perspective needed in order to assess how narratives persist, wane or change in the *longue durée*. But by focusing on particular events, which in many cases are perceived as crises, we do have the possibility to deepen how narratives are produced, spread and received in times of crisis and how these may modify background ideas not only about migration and (“others” framed as) migrants, but also about ourselves.

**TABLE 3. Explanatory factors – Summary table**

Explanatory factors	Definition	Indicators
<b>What</b>	Content	Cognitive plausibility
		Emotive appeal
<b>How</b>	Framing	Flexibility
		Facts versus emotions
<b>Who</b>	Attributed to actors	Credibility
	Both by producers and receivers	Interests
	Exercised by actors	Power
<b>Why</b>	Actors' strategies	Purpose
		Target
<b>Where</b>	Intra-sphere diffusion	Logics and priorities
		Structural and organisational factors
	Cross-sphere diffusion	Logics and priorities
		Structural features
<b>When</b>	Competition in agenda-setting	Between different problems
		Between different framings of the same problem
	Timing / context	Crises as disruptive events
		'Normality' and lack of novelty



## 4. Some concluding remarks: temporal scale and cultural hegemony

In conclusion, it is worth reverting to the importance of the temporal dimension in defining, explaining and gauging the impact of (migration) narratives in the public sphere. As stated above (footnote 5), the main empirical focus of the BRIDGES project is on the production of narratives about specific events over a relatively short lapse of time (2-3 weeks in WP3 and up to few months in WP7 and WP8).<sup>6</sup> This is the reason why, in this concept note, we haven't put much emphasis on the *persistence of a given narrative over time* as a possible parameter for measuring narrative success.

However, once we change scale and shift the focus from narratives referring to specific migration-related events (e.g. migrant arrivals, political debates about migrant rights, or terrorist attacks involving migrants as perpetrators or victims, i.e. the three categories of events that we have considered in WP3) to broader narratives about (im)migration as a social phenomenon, the temporal dimension and the capacity of such broader narratives to consolidate and persist over time become fundamental. Only in that way, they can eventually become “master narratives” (Halverson, Goodall and Corman 2011).

When we operate this change of scale – from the short to the long term, and from reporting events to making sense of more general trends – also some other adaptations of the conceptual framework that we have been illustrating so far may be opportune (Table 3). In particular, in order to reduce risks of confusion, we propose to introduce the concept of migration narrative hegemony (MNH) as a core category for assessing the long-term systemic “success” of narratives about migration as a multi-dimensional and durable (or “structural”, but this attribute is often controversial when applied to migration) social phenomenon.

**TABLE 4. Conceptual categories according to the narrative scale**

Narrative scale	Most appropriate temporal horizon for assessment	Most pertinent category for assessment
Event-related narratives	Short term (weeks, months)	Migration Narrative Success (MNS)
Broader narratives on migration as a social phenomenon (potentially “master narratives”)	Long term (years)	Migration Narrative Hegemony (MNH)

This concept note is not the appropriate place for elaborating on the factors that may lead narratives on migration as a social phenomenon to evolve into master narratives and gain hegemony. Besides what historical research carried out in Work Package 2 already tells us in this respect (Comte 2021), this crucial and extremely complex question will rather be discussed at the end of the project, when a trans-disciplinary integration of the knowledge produced in different WPs will be attempted. In particular, it will only be at the end of the project that we will be able to address the question of how and why (often) inaccurate and emotionally loaded narratives portraying international migration (and ensuing cultural diversity) as generally undesirable have gained such prominence in contemporary Europe.

6. It should be specified, however, that not only in the historical exploration carried out in WP2 (Comte 2021), but also in WPs7-8 (dealing with the impact of narratives on policymaking at the national and EU level), the long term will be incorporated more systematically in the empirical analysis, thereby allowing also assessments about the persistence of particular migration narratives.

What we may insist on here, before concluding, is the (perhaps) obvious but crucial interdependence between short-term, event-related narratives, and broader “societal” narratives about migration as a social phenomenon. Not only in the sense that the gradual and constant accumulation of homogeneous event-related narratives is critical for building up hegemonic societal master narratives. This is certainly true, but also the opposite seems confirmed by empirical research. Namely that MNS strongly depends on each narrative’s relations with a much broader narrative horizon. As put by the authors of WP3 working paper on the Italian case:

“...the success of [*specific migration narratives in*] the present is in part the fruit of success in the past, as new narratives must accord to persistent master narratives if they hope to resonate to the ears of most of the actors involved, casting archetypical characters that must be fit to the assigned roles.” (Maneri et al. 2022).

In short, and to conclude, it is very hard and seldom possible for a specific event-related migration narrative to achieve success if it is not converging and in syntony with a pre-existing hegemonic societal master narrative. Indeed, migration narratives – and more generally our attempts to make sense of the complex and often disorienting world we live in – have a very strong inertia, that is perhaps proportional to their vital importance for both individuals and the society as a whole.

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# BRIDGES

Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

**BRIDGES:** Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives is a project funded by the EU H2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and implemented by a consortium of 12 institutions from all over Europe. The project aims to understand the causes and consequences of migration narratives in a context of increasing politicisation and polarisation around these issues by focusing on six European countries: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. To do so, BRIDGES adopts an interdisciplinary and co-productive approach and is implemented by a diverse consortium formed by universities, think tanks and research centres, cultural associations, and civil society organisations.

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